

A STRATEGY FOR COMBATTING TERRORISM

Brian Michael Jenkins

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The Rand Corporation  
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PREFACE

The following paper was prepared at the request of the United States International Communication Agency for distribution by the Agency to foreign government officials, educators, scholars, libraries and news media representatives.



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The inauguration of the new President in Washington coincided almost to the minute with the release of the American hostages held in Teheran. With 14 months of frustration finally over, this was an occasion for rejoicing. The 52 remaining hostages at last were coming home, safely. No more would we be offended every night by televised scenes of blindfolded diplomats, orchestrated crowds shouting on cue from some off-camera slogan master, garbage being carried in the American flag.

But amid the national celebration that accompanied the homecoming of the hostages, there also was a lot of residual anger: against the Iranians who had taken our embassy, against those who were seizing hostages anywhere, against all terrorists. In tune with this anger, the new administration in Washington publicly elevated the problem of international terrorism to an issue of paramount importance. And the strong public statements made in Washington probably reflected accurately the emotions of the American people at the time.

These public statements represent a commitment to do something effective about terrorism. They must now be followed by concrete measures. To this end we must first assess the state of the battle. What are the trends in terrorism? What, if anything, have the terrorists around the world achieved beyond the casualties and property damage they have caused? What have been the broader effects of terrorist actions?

Overshadowed by an avalanche of events of grander scale in 1980--the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, the war between Iraq and Iran, the workers' strike in Poland, the fears of Soviet military intervention--the lesser wars of terrorism have continued on the boulevards and backstreets of London, New York, Rome, Washington, Paris, San Salvador, Bogotá, Strasbourg, and Istanbul.

The use of terrorist tactics worldwide has increased since 1968. The numbers of incidents show this upward trend, although their totals may differ from year to year. Moreover, terrorists are becoming more ruthless, more willing to kill, perhaps also more willing to be killed. We see evidence of this in the growing number of terrorist incidents in which more than one person has been killed. The bombing of the train station in Bologna, Italy, where more than 80 people were killed is a terrifying example of a possible trend toward more indiscriminate violence. Ten years ago only about 5 percent of all international terrorist incidents involved more than one fatality. By the end of the decade, this percentage had doubled.

Several trends have continued to this day. Embassies have remained prime targets of terrorists. Guerrillas in Colombia seized the Dominican Republic embassy in Bogotá during a diplomatic reception, taking the ambassadors of 18 nations hostage. Gunmen seized the Iranian embassy in London. Armed militants in Guatemala occupied Spain's embassy in that country.

There were many assassinations, some of them ordered by governments against foreign foes or domestic dissidents abroad. While Iranian militants continued to hold the American embassy in Teheran, Iranian gunmen attempted unsuccessfully to kill the former prime minister of Iran in Paris, but did succeed in killing a former Iranian government official in Washington. Libyan assassins roamed Europe killing fellow countrymen who failed to heed Colonel Qaddafi's demand that they return to Libya.

In various quarters, however, governments began to demonstrate their readiness to use force against terrorists, with mixed results. An American commando team was sent to rescue the hostages in Teheran but a string of mishaps frustrated the operation. When terrorists murdered two of their hostages at the Iranian embassy in London, British commandos assaulted the embassy, killing five of the six gunmen and rescuing all of the remaining hostages. Guatemalan security forces reoccupied the Spanish embassy in Guatemala City, but only one of the hostages and one of the hostage-takers survived. With the cooperation of Thailand, Indonesian commandos were recently able to rescue all of the hostages aboard a hijacked airliner in Bangkok in a truly impressive demonstration of international cooperation and tactical skill.

But terrorism persists. Despite increased international cooperation, most notably among the Western European nations, and despite police successes in apprehending large numbers of terrorists--notably in Italy--the old terrorist groups have demonstrated a capacity for survival and regeneration and new groups appear. The world faces a long campaign with little immediate prospect of final victory.

Beyond the casualties and damages they caused, terrorists have created an atmosphere of apprehension and alarm. For every actual victim of terrorism, there are thousands of vicarious victims watching events on television. Many are devoting increasing amounts of money and effort to personal security.

With a hardening of targets has come a hardening of attitudes. People in countries most affected by terrorism reveal growing resistance to social reform and lend increasing support to extreme measures against terrorism. Where some governments adopted policies of brutal repression in the name of combatting terrorists, many individuals simply withdrew behind bolted doors of indifference.

Growing political violence, combined with constant increases in violent crime, and the graphic depiction of this violence in fiction and in the news, have created an environment in which any political or religious fanatic or individual lunatic may view killing a public figure or hijacking an airliner as a step toward utopia, the millenium, or a solution to his own emotional problems. It is this environment which provides common features to the attempted assassinations of President Reagan and Pope John Paul II.

What can be done about terrorism? It is a breathtaking descent from the speeches against terrorism to what can actually be done about it. This is especially true for the United States. Our problem differs from that of most other countries.

Although certainly not immune to terrorist violence, the United States has not experienced--so far--the high levels of domestic terrorism suffered by some of the nations in Latin America and the Middle East. Terrorism in America is not a major law enforcement problem. Indeed, compared with the volume of ordinary violent crime, the amount of terrorist violence is minuscule.

America's terrorist problem also differs from that of Israel, a nation that finds itself in a virtual state of war with opponents on its borders who may act in a conventional military mode or who, more frequently, act in a terrorist mode across its borders. Ordinarily, the United States cannot attack terrorists with military means.

For the United States, the problem of terrorism lies mainly outside its borders, and there it is a very serious problem. Few people realize that about a third of all international terrorist incidents in the world involve U.S. citizens or facilities--incidents in which terrorists cross national frontiers to carry out their assaults, attacking targets connected with foreign states as when they kidnap diplomats, for example, or attacking international lines of commerce as in airline hijackings.

Most of the incidents involving Americans have taken place abroad. Terrorists in Latin America and the Middle East frequently perceive, erroneously, that the United States has a stranglehold on local governments in these regions, and therefore that they can try to increase their own leverage by kidnapping U.S. officials. Terrorists perceive American corporations as enormously wealthy, making them lucrative targets and symbols of a despised economic system. American diplomats and other officials, American business executives, American facilities, thus figure disproportionately among terrorist targets.

If not directly targeted, American citizens are often involved. Ubiquitous travelers, Americans are almost invariably on the passenger list of hijacked airliners, and may become the hijackers' preferred bargaining chips as they seek to coerce other governments to comply with their demands.

For example, in the recent hijacking of a Pakistani airliner, the hijackers quickly identified and threatened to execute the three Americans on board if the government of Pakistan did not meet their demands for the release of 54 prisoners. The U.S. government exerted no pressure of any kind on the Pakistani government to comply. However, Pakistan decided to meet the hijackers' demands only minutes before the hijackers' ultimatum expired.

In this connection, one problem for the American government is that, contrary to terrorist perceptions of enormous American influence,

the United States often has only marginal influence over the policies of other governments and thus the outcome of such incidents. Thrown into a political crisis by a terrorist event, the local government closes in upon itself. The head of the government himself makes the crucial decisions, counseled by only a few trusted advisors. In such circumstances, the attitudes and policies of other nations are important only to the extent that they directly affect the standing or even survival of the country's leadership, which is seldom the case.

Frequently involved, but often on the sidelines and unable to directly affect the outcome of any terrorist event, what can the United States do about terrorism? Our current approach emphasizes the need for better intelligence; heavier security—at our embassies, for example; a no-concessions policy to discourage terrorists from seizing hostages; effective management of terrorist incidents that do occur; and the creation and use of special antiterrorist military capabilities as a measure of last resort. With the exception of our declared no-concessions policy, which we also encourage other countries to follow, these measures are primarily defensive mechanisms. Although absolutely necessary, these measures alone do not constitute a strategy against terrorism.

Any American strategy to combat terrorism must reflect the unique aspects of the problem of terrorism as it affects the United States. Such a strategy would include the following elements.

The no-concessions policy of the U.S. government, meaning that the United States will offer no ransom nor release prisoners in return for the lives of hostages held by terrorists, does constitute an element of strategy. It is aimed at reducing or eliminating the gains terrorists might make by seizing hostages. Its principal problem is whether or not it is always realistic.

To heighten the risks for terrorists, the United States is also trying to obtain a number of international agreements that will deny asylum to terrorists. Because our primary concern is international terrorism, our strategy must indeed be aimed at seeking international cooperation. A no-concessions policy will have greater effect if it is universally adopted. International agreements which guarantee that

those who commit certain crimes will be promptly prosecuted or extradited increases the risks to the terrorists.

Because terrorists provide few opportunities for direct attack by the United States, our approach must necessarily be indirect. This means identifying, isolating, and, it is to be hoped, ultimately modifying the behavior of those states that support terrorists with training, money, weapons, or asylum, or passively tolerate them. Thus, our great emphasis must be on the links between terrorists and states that support terrorism. This is the context in which we must view our recent expulsion of Libyan diplomats from the United States.

But, what is terrorism? The necessity for international cooperation against international terrorism means that the United States must seek and maintain the broadest international consensus in the definition of terrorism and measures to combat it. Expanding that consensus in the international arena means narrowing and depoliticizing the definition of terrorism. As a pejorative, the word can be a political weapon, and it is so used in international debate. If one party can successfully attach the label "terrorist" to its opponent, then it has indirectly persuaded others to adopt its moral viewpoint.

This has led to the cliche that one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter. The phrase implies that there can be no objective definition of terrorism, that there are no universal standards of conduct in peace or war. While recognizing the diversity of views on terrorism, this is a notion we must fight.

Most nations have identified, through law, modes of conduct that are criminal, among them homicide, kidnapping, threats to life, the willful destruction of property. Even war has rules outlawing the use of certain tactics.

If we define terrorism by the nature of the act then, not by the identity of the perpetrators or the nature of their cause, an objective definition of terrorism becomes possible. All terrorist acts are crimes. Many would also be violations of the rules of war, if a state of war existed. All involve violence or the threat of violence, often coupled with specific demands. The targets are mainly civilians. The motives are political. The actions generally are designed to achieve maximum publicity. The perpetrators are usually members of an organized

group, and unlike other criminals, they often claim credit for the act. (This is a true hallmark of terrorism.) And, finally, it is intrinsic to a terrorist act that it is usually intended to produce psychological effects far beyond the immediate physical damage. One man's terrorist is everyone's terrorist.

Can terrorism be outlawed? The world will not simply outlaw international terrorism. However, it may be possible to create a corpus of international agreements on terrorism each aimed at a specific terrorist tactic. Many nations consider some "terrorist" attacks a justifiable form of struggle on the grounds that where the end is "national liberation," terrorism is justifiable as the means. Nations, however, can agree that certain terrorist tactics are troublesome to all, such as the hijacking of airliners. Virtually all nations have airlines. Many have experienced hijackings. Therefore, despite political differences, there is a great deal of cooperation in dealing with this problem.

Two other terrorist trends have caused increasing international concern: One is the growing number of attacks on diplomats and on embassies. Nearly a hundred diplomats have been kidnapped or murdered in the last ten years. During the same period, members of known terrorist groups and other armed militants have taken over embassies or consulates in about 50 cases, nearly half of them having occurred in the last two years. Because all nations have diplomats, there is some international consensus that something needs to be done. A stringent convention reasserting diplomatic immunity and calling for the isolation of those nations that are negligent in providing security for diplomats (or who, as Iran did, align themselves with groups who seize embassies) should have a good chance of widespread acceptance.

Similarly, there would be some support for an agreement aimed at the increasing use of terrorist tactics by governments against foreign foes or domestic dissidents living abroad--for example, government-based assassination campaigns against political emigres abroad.

To attain such international cooperation, terrorist actions must be narrowly defined--not in broad political terms but rather in terms of specific mutual interest. Therefore, the United States Government must not aggravate the problem of combatting terrorism with definitions

that are too sweeping or offer initiatives that appear to serve only American political interests. Isolating offenders must be balanced against the need to maintain the broadest possible consensus.

We should not be overoptimistic in regard to obtaining and enforcing international agreements. No measure against terrorism will elicit universal support. At most, we will get some cooperation among like-minded governments in a few specific areas and even more limited cooperation from those that are not. Even then, international conventions are only paper agreements, difficult to enforce; however, they can lead to more active future cooperation.

We must also keep in mind that the ability of the United States to identify and isolate offenders often may exceed that of other nations. For economic reasons, for domestic political reasons, for reasons of foreign policy, not all nations may be able or willing to take active measures against violators in every instance.

Thus, as in war, it takes more than determination to defeat the adversary; it takes a strategy. Such a strategy, in the case of terrorism, is particularly difficult to design not only because terrorists are ubiquitous, elusive, ruthless, and imaginative (though perhaps not as imaginative as one might think), but also because any effective defense against them must be of an international sort, binding together in common policies and actions nations and governments that often have vastly divergent views on almost anything, including some of the aspects of terrorism. But creating a feasible strategy to combat terrorism reduces the pressure in dealing with each terrorist incident by providing a "longer perspective." Such a strategy would allow for setbacks and tradeoffs without individual incidents being perceived by the public as major defeats, and would also be useful in guiding public statements before, during, and after incidents. It would, finally, provide a framework for assessing the utility of each contemplated measure.

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